

Browning's *The Ring and the Book* : Altering the Case for Shelley's *The Cenci*

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Harold Bloom's reading of the poetic influence among poets has recently dominated the way in which we regard the relationship between the English poets P. B. Shelley (1792–1822) and Robert Browning (1812–89).⁽¹⁾ Although John Woolford, in his *Browning the Revisionary*, does not mention the Bloomian idea of “the anxiety of influence,” in his account of Browning he nevertheless comes close to what Bloom describes as Browning's swerving away from his predecessor, Shelley. Woolford defines one of his objectives as being that of dealing with Browning's revision “of a system of values” ; that is, by polarizing poetry into the “subjective” and “objective,” Browning assigns the former to Shelley, thereby reserving the latter for himself. The subjective poet is prone to “solipsism” because he only deals with “the supreme intelligence” and not with “humanity in action.”⁽²⁾ Browning, who repudiated the “introspective transcendence” of Shelley's poetry, adopted “a realist or pragmatic outlook,” thereby fulfilling his mission as the “objective poet.”⁽³⁾ This is an instance of “misreading” or “misprision” as Bloom would have it: the latecomer, Browning, deliberately misreads his precursor, Shelley, and thereby defines his own task as an “objective poet.”

While much of the criticism concerning the influence of Shelley on Browning has focused on Browning's early works, where his swerving

away from Shelley is most conspicuous, very little has been said about Browning's middle to late works that do not concern Shelley directly.⁽⁴⁾ Indeed, Browning's much altered style of dramatic monologues may not immediately call for a comparison with Shelley's poetry. Nonetheless, as Browning's later poems such as "Cenciaja" and "Memorabilia" attest, Shelley remained an active force in Browning's creative imagination. In this essay, I would like to read Browning's narrative poem *The Ring and the Book* (1868–69) as an ongoing dialogue with Shelley, and more specifically with Shelley's verse drama *The Cenci* (1819).⁽⁵⁾ Although Bloom lists these two works as examples of *apophrades* (that is, the latecomer, having successfully absorbed his precursor, becomes more like the precursor of the original precursor himself), which is highly suggestive, I will not be limiting my argument to this qualification alone.⁽⁶⁾ My reading will also be historicist in arguing that Browning in his *The Ring and the Book* is responding to a set historical context surrounding *The Cenci*.

Browning continued to regard Shelley very highly despite his discovery of the so-called "Harriet letters," which came to his attention in 1858.⁽⁷⁾ Reading the letters, Browning discovered that Shelley and his first wife Harriet Westbrook had not separated on the basis of mutual consent, but that Shelley had abandoned her. Browning was later to express his disappointment in a letter to Dr. F. J. Furnivall dated December 8, 1885:

For myself, I painfully contrast my notions of Shelley the *man* and Shelley, well, even the *poet*, with what they were sixty years ago, when I only had his works, for a certainty, and took his character on trust.⁽⁸⁾

Browning's rather harsh judgment of Shelley here has no doubt discouraged critics from pursuing Shelley's influence on Browning's later works. However, there is early testimony suggesting that Browning had not been of one mind about Shelley all along and thus that the quote above indicates Browning's somewhat hardened view of Shelley in his very late years. In a letter to Dante Gabriel Rossetti dated June 24, 1869, A. C. Swinburne gives an account of Browning's knowledge of the Harriet letters, but concludes that "[n]ow of course Browning loves Shelley even as much as you and I do (he said so in concluding) but these, he is certain, are the facts of the case."⁽⁹⁾ As late as 1876, Browning published "Cenciaja" in which he extolled Shelley's *The Cenci* as "your superb / Achievement." We can therefore conclude that although Browning was disturbed by the Harriet letters, they did not necessarily serve to expunge Shelley's presence in his creative imagination.

Browning is known to have owned a copy of *The Cenci*, and we can assume that he was familiar with the work.⁽¹⁰⁾ In his "Essay on Shelley" (1855), he lists *The Cenci* together with "Julian and Maddalo" and "Ode to Naples" as examples of the "objective poetry" of Shelley's output.⁽¹¹⁾ The "Essay" was originally written as an introduction to a collection of letters by Shelley, which proved to be forgeries. While assigning the role of subjective poet to Shelley, Browning argues that Shelley was equally able to write objectively. While Browning was working on *The Ring and the Book*, he came across a reference to the Cenci case in the Old Yellow Book, which he later introduced in "Cenciaja."⁽¹²⁾ Although the relationship between *The Cenci* and *The Ring* has been noted by Kurobane, Finn, and Cundiff, the direct influence of

The Cenci on *The Ring and the Book* has never been discussed;⁽¹³⁾ I argue in this paper that Browning not only tried to emulate, but also to “overcome” Shelley’s work. The result is that Browning produced a work that is highly subjective in its idealistic appeal, as opposed to Shelley’s objective reality. My focus is less on the “subjective” and “objective” aspects of their output, but rather on the revisionary scheme which Browning adopts in his writing of *The Ring*.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning has often been discussed as the figure that inspired the characterization of Pompilia and the rescue theme of *The Ring*.⁽¹⁴⁾ No doubt Browning’s own efforts to save the poetess from her tyrannical father have more than a passing resemblance to the story that he tells in the poem. It is equally easy to understand how Elizabeth Barrett might have acted as the model for Pompilia, a paragon of virtue, if one reflects for a moment on Browning’s depiction of Elizabeth Barrett.⁽¹⁵⁾ My intention, however, is to open up other possibilities for the inspiration of the poem. I shall argue that Browning had Shelley’s *The Cenci* in mind when composing *The Ring*.

In discussing Browning’s revisionary attempt to re-write *The Cenci*, I would like to make the following points. Firstly, the polarization of characters into good and evil is something that Browning seems to have been drawn to in his depiction of the characters in *The Ring*—Pompilia, Caponsachi, Guido, and the Pope. In addition to the simple Manichaeism at work, I argue that he might have conceived the idea from *The Cenci* in which Shelley draws a similarly clear distinction between two opposing natures. Secondly, Browning plays with the idea of casuistry, which Shelley brought into his play as the central idea behind the main character, Beatrice, and her lover Orsino. Whereas Shel-

ley makes Beatrice vulnerable to casuistry and thereby to her tragic fall, Browning assigns casuistry to Guido whose character remains consistent throughout. Thirdly, I take on board what James Chandler, in his *England in 1819*, argues as a “case” for *The Cenci*: Shelley presents a situation that is morally problematic, and transforms it so that the moral dilemma is resolved by sympathy with the victim-turned-aggressor.⁽¹⁶⁾ My contention is that Browning likewise re-created his own “case” based on the Old Yellow Book, but with Shelley’s *The Cenci* in mind. Lastly, *The Cenci* is a historic play in both senses of the word: that is, it is based on an historical event, but it also represents the historicity of the time in which Shelley composed the play. The significance of the year 1819 has been brought to critical attention by Chandler’s *England in 1819*; but the force with which Shelley wrote of the political milieu of his times in other poems of 1819 cannot have been lost on Browning. I argue that Browning responded to Shelley’s historical message by re-writing it according to his own sense of historicity.

I will begin by providing a brief summary of the two works. Beatrice Cenci’s case concerns a court trial that was held in Rome “during the Pontificate of Clement VIII, in the year 1599.”⁽¹⁷⁾ Beatrice was the daughter of Count Cenci, of an illustrious family, who was tried, along with her brother Giacomo and her stepmother Lucretia, for the murder of her father. Beatrice, who was the main victim of Count Cenci’s perverted passion and hatred, pleaded for deliverance from the hands of her father only to be spurned. When she was subjected to incest (although never explicitly stated in *The Cenci* but only inferred), Beatrice decided to take action, which was met by the support of her brother and mother who were equally cruelly treated by the Count. They

hired two men to execute the task, but their plot was discovered when the two men were captured and tortured. Beatrice along with Giacomo and Lucretia was sentenced to death for the murder of Count Cenci.

Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* is a re-working of this actual Roman murder story, in which Pompilia figures as its tragic heroine. Having been married off to Guido Franceschini, a middle-aged man of an illustrious family, for mercenary reasons on Guido's part, and for social status on the part of Pompilia's parents, Violante and Pietro Comparini, Pompilia suffers from her husband's retribution and ill treatment due to her parents' actions. After finding out that Guido is impoverished and had only feigned his wealth, Violante and Pietro bring a suit against him for the return of Pompilia's dowry. Violante also discloses the fact that Pompilia is not her real child and that she had bought her from a prostitute, thereby nullifying Pompilia's dowry: if she is not their daughter they cannot be asked to provide her with a dowry. Pompilia, oppressed by the tyranny of her husband, flees with the help of a priest, Caponsacchi, but is overtaken by Guido on her way to Rome. At this point, Caponsacchi is charged with adultery while Pompilia is sent off to a nunnery for penitent women. Pompilia, however, being pregnant at the time, is placed in the custody of her parents and gives birth to a son, Gaetano, eight months later. Guido turns up at their house and successfully pretends to be Caponsacchi, gains entrance, and murders Violante, Pietro, and fatally wounds Pompilia. Guido and his hired men are caught afterwards and tried for murder.

Polarization of characters

The Ring consists of ten testimonies or monologues by nine different people or peoples, each of whom offers his or her account of the story. Therefore, Browning does not offer an authoritative account of the incident, but allows differences to emerge through their varying perspectives. Although critics have argued that for this reason the poem is written in an objective style, it is also true that the poem reveals its preferences through the convincing accounts given by Pompilia, Caponsacchi, and the Pope. Each testimony is weighed against the others so that by the time the poem reaches the Pope's monologue, readers have come to accept what the Pope has to say. The overriding notion is that Pompilia is "the perfect paragon" (3.81). This depiction by "the other half-Rome" (who represents the opinion of the Romans that Pompilia was innocent) is joined by Caponsacchi, Bottinius, and the Pope: "the perfect soul Pomilia" (6.1162), "martyr and saint" (6.1992), "a faultless nature in flawless form" (9.195), "the worth of perfect chastity" (9.1179), "our paragon" (9.1211), "the marvel of a soul like thine" (10.1018) all attest to Pomilia's purity.

It has usually been argued that the historical Pompilia was not the kind of saint portrayed by Browning, but "an ordinary girl, deprived of advantages in childhood, with sufficient good looks to attract, and insufficient character to resist temptation, and with instincts stronger than her principles".⁽¹⁸⁾ That Browning infused the tale with his own idealism cannot be denied, even if we take seriously his insistence on his faithfulness to the Old Yellow Book.⁽¹⁹⁾ The question, then, is where Browning got the idea of Pompilia being a "paragon of virtue and purity."⁽²⁰⁾ Critics have argued for the memory of Elizabeth Barrett as the model on which Browning based his heroine: "I am con-

vinced that it [Mrs. Browning's spiritual presence] entered largely into the conception of Pompilia, and, so far as this depend on it, the character of the whole work."⁽²¹⁾

Even if this explanation does not beg any questions as to its validity, there is no reason for not exploring other means by which Browning conceived his heroine. It is not too far to seek the model of Pompilia in Beatrice Cenci, who likewise proved her purity and innocence in her endurance of hardship and oppression. In fact, the tragedy of *The Cenci* is emphasized by Beatrice Cenci's inner integrity: "Beatrice Cenci appears to have been one of those rare persons in whom energy and gentleness dwell together without destroying one another."⁽²²⁾ Unlike Beatrice, however, Pompilia forgives Guido for his actions, and her forgiveness closely corresponds to Shelley's insistence that "no person can be truly dishonoured by the act of another; and the fit return to make the most enormous injuries is kindness and forbearance."⁽²³⁾ Browning's characterization of Pompilia in this way can be read as another instance of his revisionary attempt at re-writing *The Cenci*. In *The Ring*, the polarization of characters into good and evil follows that of *The Cenci*: Beatrice is the epitome of goodness, whereas Count Cenci is that of evil. Likewise in Browning's characterizations, Guido is "a human monster, sunk to the level of a brute," set against the "whiteness" of Pompilia.⁽²⁴⁾ In a similar manner in which Count Cenci sought to destroy the purity of Beatrice by polluting her senses with foul actions and thoughts, Guido "tortured [her] with due care" (3.718). Guido took to revenge "since hate was thus the truth of him" (7.1727).⁽²⁵⁾

The Pope of *The Cenci* represents the corrupted Church; thus the

Pope, who prefers to maintain a good relationship with the socially and economically powerful Count Cenci, does not grant Beatrice her wish to prosecute her father. The Pope, whom Browning uses as his mouthpiece, is not the Pope of *The Cenci* ; rather, the Pope symbolizes a spiritual force that is commensurate with Browning's own religious beliefs. Again, it is possible to read this change as Browning's revisionary hand in writing *The Ring*.

Another change which Browning made to his work was in the figure of Caponsacchi : "the real Caponsacchi was as much at home in Arezzo's red-light district as in its aristocratic drawing-rooms" and "clearly possessed a dangerous attraction for women."⁽²⁶⁾ In *The Ring*, Caponsacchi is idealized like Pompilia ; he becomes a priest-knight who risks his position as a savior of the oppressed victim by rescuing her. In *The Cenci*, Beatrice befriends a prelate, Orsino, who turns out to be false.⁽²⁷⁾ Caponsacchi is the ignoble Orsino of *The Cenci* turned magnanimous : whereas Orsino acts selfishly based on his own interests, Caponsacchi is able to transcend his own self-interest by sympathizing with the victim. What is clear from Browning's depiction of the characters is the polarization of them into good and evil : in this, he followed Shelley's example, but he also revised Shelley's delineation of the "sad reality" by creating the Pope and Caponsacchi as the spiritual supporters of the oppressed victim, Pompilia.

Casuistry

Casuistry lies at the heart of both works that deal with Rome of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and reached its pinnacle during that period, before the onslaught by Pascal that eventually led to its de-

cline.⁽²⁸⁾ Both Shelley and Browning utilize the force of casuistry that was pervasive in the ethical realm and jurisprudence of the Catholic world of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Their understanding of casuistry is unequivocally negative and much of the legacy of the casuistry in the nineteenth-century is reflected in their disparaging use of the word. Casuistry came to bear significance in the light of complex moral problems that presented themselves in Renaissance Italy.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, casuistry is:

that part of ethics which resolves cases of conscience, applying the general rules of religion and morality to particular instances in which circumstances alter cases or in which there appears to be a conflict of duties.

So casuists “approached moral questions in the spirit of Aristotle and Aquinas rather than of Plato and Augustine” by “choose[ing] a course of action prudently and virtuously, rather than ... ascend[ing] to a vision of eternal truth.”⁽²⁹⁾ By allowing exceptions, however, rather than adhering to rules, casuistry led to laxity: Pascal claimed that casuistry was used to excuse those who were rich and powerful. Thus casuistry “came to mean ‘a quibbling, evasive way of dealing with difficult cases of duty; sophistry’”.⁽³⁰⁾ Shelley and Browning came to use the word with this meaning that had been brought about by Pascal’s attack.

Orsino, who is a prelate in love with Beatrice, is an example of the casuistic thinking that Shelley believed was prevalent among Catholics at the time. Because Orsino fears that if Beatrice is wedded to some kin by the arrangement of the Pope, he “should be debarred from all access” (1.2.71), he is determined to keep things as they are despite Bea-

trice's petition to the Pope. For the contemporary audience, tragedy befalls Beatrice not necessarily when she conceives the act of killing her father (although this is tragic in itself that she has become vengeful), but when she falls prey to the casuistic reasoning of justifying her action. It is Orsino who first conceives the idea of Cenci's murder, which he then transposes to others thereby making them commit the act itself:

Now what harm
 If Cenci should be murdered?—Yet, if murdered,
 Wherefore by me? And what if I could take
 The profit, yet omit the sin and peril
 In such an action? Of all earthly things
 I fear a man whose blows outspeed his words;
 And such is Cenci: and while Cenci lives
 His daughter's dowry were a secret grave
 If a priest wins her.—Oh, fair Beatrice! (2.2.120–128)

And he prospers best,
 Not who becomes the instrument of ill,
 But who can flatter the dark spirit, that makes
 Its empire and its prey of other hearts,
 Till it become his slave as I will do. (2.2.157–161)⁽³¹⁾

Orsino's reasoning is so dastardly here that he has to interpolate his own thoughts with an affectionate exclamation. On the other hand, Beatrice becomes convinced that killing her father is the only way to redeem the ill that has befallen her:

As I have said, I have endured a wrong,

Which, though it be expressionless, is such
As asks atonement, both for what is past,
And lest I be reserved, day after day,
To load with crimes an overburdened soul,
And be—what ye can dream not. I have prayed
To God, and I have talked with my own heart,
And have unraveled my entangled will,
And have at length determined what is right. (3.1.213–221)

Although killing her father is a grave crime, under the circumstances—that is, of being subjected to incest—Beatrice justifies her action in the presence of God. Her conviction that she is doing right is maintained until the end, so that when the two hirelings kill Count Cenci, she insists on her innocence:

The deed is done,
And what may follow now regards not me.
I am universal as the light;
Free as the earth-surrounding air; as firm
As the world's centre. Consequence, to me,
Is as the wind which strikes the solid rock
But shakes it not. (4.4.46–52)

She takes the law into her own hands and thereby confuses its sanction with her own retribution.

Browning revises the role of casuistic reasoning in *The Ring*. He exonerates the main characters—Pompilia and Caponsacchi—from casuistic thinking and reserves it exclusively for Guido and the lawyers. Guido paints a picture of himself as someone who had fairly entered a bargain—“Being the exchange of quality for wealth” (5.502)—but

was cheated by Pietro and Violante when they reclaimed their daughter's dowry. It was *he* who had been injured by the pact ; therefore he had good reasons to treat Pompilia with scorn. When he sought after his wife and Caponsacchi upon their fleeing, he would have been justified in killing them on the spot for adultery, but decided to resort to the law, which assigned Caponsacchi to another town and confined Pompilia to a nunnery. Having been let down again, Guido decides to take action, only because the law denied him justice : "No more of law ; a voice beyond the law / Enters my heart, *Quis est pro Domino?*" (5.1548- 9). At this point, when Guido imagines that the Lord is on his side, he is taking the matter into his own hands just as Beatrice had done. He thinks that his case will exonerate his actions. Killing an adulterous wife was considered excusable by the casuists, because adultery injured a gentleman's honor ;⁽³²⁾ however, if the killing was done in cold blood, which was the case with Guido, because he waited several months before acting, then the qualification would not apply to him. Guido tries to argue around this so that his prolonged injury somehow gives him the right to take action. The Pope sees through this when he says : "There's Loyola adapted to our time! / Under such guidance Guido plays his part" (10.1942- 3). St. Ignatius Loyola was the founder of the Jesuit order, notorious for its worldliness and casuistry (*The Ring* 639). Guido's defender Archangelis argues similarly : "that Honour is man's supreme good" (8.585) and : "Whenever honour and repute are touched / Arrives at term of fury and despair, / Loses all guidance from the reason-check" (8. 603- 5). Therefore Guido's case is to be treated as an exception to the law, because it was an act of injured honor. This casuistic reasoning is overturned because the story which

Pompilia tells gains conviction, as Guido testifies:

She too must shimmer through the gloom o' the grave,
Come and confront me—not at judgment-seat
Where I could twist her soul, as erst her flesh,
And turn her truth into a lie, but there,
O' the death-bed, with God's hand between us both,
Striking me dumb, and helping her to speak,
Tell her own story her own way, and turn
My plausibility to nothingness! (11.1682-89)

Pompilia's story is so revealing of the truth that the prosecutor, Bottinius, objects to her statement: "Leaving a lawyer nothing to excuse, / Reason away and show his skill about!" (9.1441-42). Thus casuistry is condemned in *The Ring* and is replaced by "truth" that is communicated through Pompilia, Caponsacchi, and the Pope.

Cases

To be a "case" requires a "falling off" from the "high road of Catholic morality" whereupon casuistry comes into play.⁽³³⁾ Shelley dramatizes the case of Beatrice Cenci as one such example in his preface to *The Cenci*: "[i]t is in the restless and anatomizing casuistry with which men seek the justification of Beatrice, yet feel that she has done what needs justification" (731). The case of Beatrice Cenci presents to us, not one of casuistic reasoning, but a "case of the heart" that requires "sympathy" of the masses that could not have been obtained if Beatrice had been "wiser and better." As James Chandler argues, it is an example of the "subordination of casuistry to sensibility": "it is a tragedy which has already received, from its capacity of *awakening and sus-*

taining the sympathy of men, approbation and success.”⁽³⁴⁾ The play has a hold on the audience in its power to move people, that is, of transferring their positions to that of Beatrice Cenci through the act of “sympathy.” We pity the heroine whose “gentle and amiable being” was “thus violently thwarted from her nature by the necessity of circumstance and opinion”; therefore we “feel that she has done what needs justification” (727–728). Browning takes this case further; he says that it was not the oppressed victim who should have endured ills, as Shelley suggested with Beatrice Cenci, but that it was the lack of help in delivering her from the circumstances that made the tragedy of the play. It was because Beatrice was reduced to a cold self-anatomizing mind that she became a monster herself.⁽³⁵⁾ Browning humanizes the tragic heroine once again by rescuing her from that destiny; by doing so, he revolutionizes the sentiment that had become stifled due to the cold rationalizing mind.

In *The Ring*, Browning likewise conceives a “case” that calls for the exercise of casuistry. The lawyers both argue casuistically, but the ultimate resolution moves away from it: readers together with members of the court are *moved* by Pompilia’s testimony that leaves little room for casuistic reasoning. Sympathy with the oppressed Pomilia exonerates her escape and makes Guido guilty of his action that was inspired by revenge. Whereas in *The Cenci* Shelley paints Beatrice as the victim of casuistry, Browning releases the heroine from it by allowing sympathy to take centre stage, thereby enabling “subordination of casuistry to sensibility” to become complete.

Browning conceived *The Ring* from the Old Yellow Book of court proceedings which he found in a market in Florence. In Book I, he tells us

how he “disappeared” and “the book grew all in all” (1.687). Even if we are not to take his words at face value, the significance of the “gold” (that is, “crude fact”) with which he “interfused” “alloy” (fancy) cannot be overlooked. He is not fabricating a story; rather, he is resuscitating an event of the past:

Yet, something dead may get to live again,
Something with too much life or not enough,
Which, either way imperfect, ended once:
And end whereat man's impulse intervenes,
Makes new beginning, starts the dead alive,
Completes the incomplete and saves the thing. (1. 729–734)

It is clear that Browning is talking about his own attempt to bring the content of the Old Yellow Book alive. However, if we consider for a moment the rich array of texts (both literal and metaphorical) that go into resuscitating a past that is made jointly by Browning and his reading of the Old Yellow Book, it is possible to read *The Cenci* as one of the texts that he was trying to bring to life. *The Cenci* was a “sad reality” that Shelley was confronted with, which Browning inherited along with *Prometheus Unbound*.⁽³⁶⁾ If the “falling off” from the “high road” is what has made a “case” for *The Cenci*, the text remains “incomplete,” a haunting presence that must be rectified or normalized by the act of “saving.” This is exactly what Browning does in *The Ring*: “I enter, spark-like, put old powers to play, / Push lines out to the limit” (1.755–56). I would like to suggest that not only did Browning re-fashion the characters according to his biographical text—that is, his rescue of Elizabeth Barrett—but he also wrote them in an attempt to re-write the tragedy of *The Cenci*. Beatrice in *The Cenci* pleads in

vain for help to escape from her monstrous father, whereupon she is made into a complete victim of her father's perverted passions. With no way of escape she despairs, fears for her own life, and therefore kills her own father. She is tried by the court and sentenced to death. There is no room for salvation in the story that Shelley tells as a reflection of "sad reality." Pompilia, who likewise pleads for help, is successful in getting it from the warrior-priest Caponsacchi. By introducing the rescue theme, Browning "saves" the inherited text from remaining incomplete due to a lack of moral resolution.

Historicity

The Cenci case, as it turns out, is not solely about a parricide for which Beatrice is sentenced to death, but the historicity of that event that calls for its re-examination. In other words, in a Catholic world in which religion is "interwoven with the whole fabric of life," it "pervades intensely the whole frame of society, and is, according to the temper of the mind which it inhabits, a passion, a persuasion, an excuse, a refuge; never a check."⁽³⁷⁾ The murder of Count Cenci is not weighed against his tyranny and evil actions toward his immediate family as would be the case in present society (thereby acting as a "check"); but is instead assessed according to the patriarchal order upon which so much religion rests:

 'Paolo Santa Croce

Murdered his mother yesterday evening,
And he is fled. Parricide growth so rife,
That soon, for some just cause no doubt, the young
Will strangle us all, dozing in our chairs. (5.4.18–22)

The Pope's example is revealing of the yardstick by which he is measuring the Cenci case: to pardon the murder of Count Cenci will only encourage the disobedience of children to their parents, which will, in effect, extend to their rebellion against the Church. Furthermore, he knows that he is the upholder of an evil system: "for some just cause no doubt." When entreated to respond to the grievances of the Cenci family against the Count, Cardinal Camillo reminds them that the Pope "holds it [the Cenci case] of most dangerous example / In aught to weaken the paternal power, / Being, as 'twere, the shadow of his own" (2.2.54–56). To the Pope then, the Cenci case is only an example of the need for the authority of the Church to be upheld at all costs.⁽³⁸⁾

The case is also in a wider sense the "case" of 1819 in which Shelley composed the play. Shelley wrote a series of political poems in 1819 that can be represented in its entirety by "England in 1819." In the poem of that name, England is represented as comprising all ills "from which a glorious Phantom may / Burst to illumine our tempestuous day."⁽³⁹⁾ 1819 figures as the symbolic year in which the state of England is represented: it saw the Peterloo Massacre, which prompted Shelley's major effort in *The Mask of Anarchy*. As James Chandler argues, it became a pivotal year on which the destiny of a nation hinged: Shelley's historicism allows him to assess it, at once, in the light of past history, and of its projection into the future. In other words, England can become a remnant of what it once was, or a revelation "to illumine our tempestuous day." This self-consciousness of seeing itself in the light of past, present, and future that is observable in the works of 1819 makes them historicist texts.

That Romantic historicism emerged in the wake of pan-European

calls for liberty and independence is another context in which to place *The Cenci*. If England was suffering under an incompetent king and politicians, Italy was subjected to foreign governance that would not allow Italian independence. After the Napoleonic Wars, England had acceded to the reactionary politics which placed Italy in the grip of the Austrian Empire. The Shelleys were equally concerned with the fate of Italy: Shelley composed the "Lines Written among the Euganean Hills, October, 1818," "Stanzas written in dejection – December 1818, near Naples," and "Ode to Liberty," while Mary Shelley embarked on *Valperga; or, The Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca* that dealt with contemporary European politics in the guise of the Italian politics of the Middle Ages. In "Lines Written among the Euganean Hills," Shelley contemplates the fate of Venice in a similar manner to that of England in "England in 1819":

But if Freedom should awake
In her omnipotence, and shake
From the Celtic Anarch's hold (150–52)

Thou and all thy sister band
Might adorn this sunny land,
Twining memories of old time
With new virtues more sublime... (156–59)

Should such transformation fail, however, "perish thou and they."⁽⁴⁰⁾ Again, Shelley posits the case of Italy as being on the brink of either mummification or regeneration. This national choice, whether to remain in moral degeneration or to "[b]urst to illumine our tempestuous day," is what Shelley is appealing to his contemporary audience

to make.

Shelley perceived a tidal change on a pan-European scale that would either bring countries or regions into modern nation-states based on the sovereignty of the people, or cause them to lapse back into the dark ages of feudalism.⁽⁴¹⁾ Such self-consciousness informs his writing and *The Cenci* is no exception.⁽⁴²⁾ The corruptibility of the Catholic Church, and the casuistic reasoning that had become the trademark of Jesuit Catholicism is subjected to scrutiny.⁽⁴³⁾ That Shelley engages in an onslaught on institutionalized religion is nothing new; however, his success in depicting a society that is entirely dependent on a religious code is worth critical attention. The tragedy of the play lies not in the fallibility of the Church (which he nonetheless makes explicit), but in the actor's justification of revenge by casuistic reasoning. One can locate the historical message of this play in the contrast between the "sad reality" of how things are and how things should be.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Set among the texts of 1819, which are marked by anger and despair at the incompetence and tyranny of the English government, it is easy to read *The Cenci* as a gentle reminder of the danger and futility of revenge in the face of adversity and oppression.

As Shelley's *The Cenci* was a statement on the condition of England and Italy in 1819, so Browning similarly encodes the historicity of Italy in his writing of *The Ring*. Unlike Shelley, Browning did not express his political views directly in his poems, but rather probed the character of historical figures, such as Napoleon III.⁽⁴⁵⁾ It is possible to argue that Browning does this to some extent with the Pope of *The Ring*, in his characterization of Pope Pius IX.⁽⁴⁶⁾ The Pope is depicted as a modern Pope who is open to heresy: "—do they, these Molinists,

/ At peril of their body and their soul,— / Recognized truths, obedient to some truth / Unrecognized yet, but perceptible?” (10. 1869–1872). That the Pope seeks truth in the character of Pompilia— “Perfect in whiteness” (10.1006) —and of Caponsacchi— “my warrior-priest” (10. 1096) —proves that he understands the “case” to be that of the “heart.” He does not question the purity of Pompilia and the motive behind Caponsacchi’s rescue as being based on his “pity” for “the oppressed” (10.1558). The Pope, whom Browning uses as his mouthpiece, is not the Pope of *The Cenci* who represented the corrupted Church; rather, the Pope symbolizes a spiritual force that is commensurate with Browning’s own religious beliefs.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Furthermore, Browning encodes the destiny of Italy in *The Ring* as Shelley had done in *The Cenci*: the “sad reality” of foreign domination under which Italy suffers, is turned into the unification of Italy through the efforts of heroes such as Garibaldi (although this is never mentioned in the text). The help that was so desperately sought after, but was not granted, is finally given to the heroine in the figure of a “warrior-saint,” Caponsacchi. That Browning altered their characters to accentuate this motif (that is, rescue as spiritual salvation) reflects the significance of spiritual regeneration in Italy up until the time he was writing *The Ring*. That the Pope (not Pius IX, for Browning was well aware of his “perfidy,” but a later Pope) was seen as a possible leader to unite Italy is again foreshadowed in the privileged place given to the Pope in *The Ring*. Browning’s *Sordello* (1840) can be cited as an earlier instance of this: in the warfare between the republicans and the imperialists, the papacy is seen as the upholder of a more advanced party. As he dedicates *The Ring* to his deceased wife, he is also encod-

ing her efforts in the achievement of Italian unification that resulted in the publication of *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851) and *Poems before Congress* (1860).

I would like to suggest not only that Browning understood the “case” that Shelley was making in *The Cenci*, but that he also understood it as a case of Romantic historicism. Shelley’s plea for a future that was projected in his poetry as the workings of an “unacknowledged legislator of the world” was responded to by Browning, who created a reality in his works that Shelley had only foreseen and felt. If the key word in Shelley’s works of 1819 is “oppression,” then Browning makes that his central theme in *The Ring* and uplifts it so that the heroine, in the end, is able to “rise” (7.1845). This coincides with Browning’s reading of Shelley as someone whose “predominating sentiment [...] throughout his whole life” was “his sympathy with the oppressed.”⁽⁴⁸⁾ The political urgency with which Shelley warned his audience of the state of England is carried forth in Browning’s writings such as *Sordello*, in which he makes the protagonist choose between progress and regression.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Just as *Sordello* was unable to make that choice but had to be killed off in 1840 due to a lack of resolution, so radicalism failed, only to make way for middle-of-the-road Whiggism.⁽⁵⁰⁾ As this failure to realize the ideal in the real became one of the legacies of Shelley which Browning inherited in his own poetics, I would argue that it also meant he internalized that political aspiration and made it into a personal one that required what I would call the revolutionizing of sentiment. Although Shelley had already done this with figures from Greek mythology in *Prometheus Unbound*, Browning attempted the same in the world of real men and women.

There is no question that Browning's personal history with Elizabeth Barrett shaped *The Ring* in its present form; but I would argue that that history contains more than a simple story of elopement and rescue, and that what he sought in his rescue of the invalid poetess contained the seed/s for his own salvation in his response to Shelley's legacy.⁽⁵¹⁾ Browning had failed in his political radicalism, falling short of Shelley's attempts; his visionary poetry came to nothing in the same way that Sordello had failed to reveal himself; Browning could not live up to Shelley's presence that, as Harold Bloom would argue, was dramatized in "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came."⁽⁵²⁾ With *Sordello*, Browning had not simply abandoned the Shelleyan cause by moving away from his poetic idol to establish his own poetics based on objective poetry; rather, he had found his Shelleyan Muse whom he literally rescued and restored to life and vitality. The interchangeability of Elizabeth Barrett and Shelley has been noted by past critics, but its import in Browning's works is still underrepresented.⁽⁵³⁾ If Beatrice Cenci stood for oppressed and abused mankind in a similar way in which "the disheveled ghost" of Browning's *Sordello* represented "humanity" (as this figure is called in the 1863 running-title), then Browning makes a gesture of liberating it from the shackles of "evil" by delivering it to a "warrior-saint" in *The Ring*. Therefore, rescue becomes Browning's way of revolutionizing the world: saved humanity will bring good to the world of ills. The story not only concerns the characters involved, but they come to represent more in the light of historicist reading. The oppressed Beatrice is Italy, which had been under the rule of the Austrian Empire. That Beatrice does not get the help that she is seeking in order to liberate herself from the oppression of Count Cenci tran-

slates well into the Italian situation of 1819. Robert Browning again takes up Italian politics in *The Ring* by way of advancing the cause that came to be known as the Risorgimento. What Browning intended as a rescue theme that was based on his actual elopement takes on a national meaning when read alongside Elizabeth Barrett's yearning for a unified Italy.⁽⁵⁴⁾ The "rescue" then can be read in multiple layers: from that of Elizabeth Barrett, to Beatrice Cenci reenvisioned as Pompilia, and Italy as woman. Whereas Shelley was only able to envision the independence of Italy, Browning was able to conceive of it more realistically. Shelley's encoding of politics in 1819 in *The Cenci* is translated in *The Ring* as its counterpart of the future: just as Shelley envisioned the future in which "a glorious Phantom may / Burst to illumine our tempestuous day," Pompilia responds to that by saying, "And I rise."

- (1) Bloom's ideas on Shelley and Browning are argued in a series of works; see *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); *Poetry and Repression: Revision from Blake to Stevens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).
- (2) John Woolford, *Browning the Revisionary* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. viii.
- (3) Ibid.
- (4) The classic text on the relationship between Shelley and Browning is Frederick A. Pottle, *Shelley and Browning: A Myth and Some Facts* (Chicago: Pembroke, 1923). Apart from an isolated treatment of Browning's later poems in relation to those of Shelley, there are only a few works that deal with Shelley's influence on Browning's oeuvre: see for example, Richard C. Keenan, "Browning and Shelley," in *Browning Institute Studies*, ed. William S. Peterson, Vol. 1 (Princeton: The Browning Institute, 1973), pp. 119 – 145; and Paul A. Cundiff, *Robert Browning: A Shelley Promethean* (St. Pe-

- tersburg, Florida : Valkyrie Press, 1977).
- (5) Browning suggested in the first instance that what was to become *The Ring and the Book* be called "*The Franceschini*, perhaps by analogy with Shelley's *The Cenci*"; see *The Ring and the Book*, ed. Richard D. Altick and Thomas J. Collins (Peterborough, Ontario : Broadview Press, 2001), p. xi.
- (6) Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 154.
- (7) Some private letters between Shelley and Harriet, his first wife, came into Browning's hands in 1858. See *Letters of Robert Browning Collected by Thomas J. Wise*, ed. Thurman L. Hood (London : John Murray, 1933), pp. 222-23.
- (8) Ibid., pp. 242-3.
- (9) Ibid., p. 371.
- (10) See P. Kelley and B. A. Coley, *The Browning Collections : A Reconstruction with Other Memorabilia* (Winfield : Wedgestone Press, 1984).
- (11) See *The Poems of Browning*, Vol. 3, ed. John Woolford, Daniel Karlin, and Joseph Phelan (Harlow : Longman, 2007), p. 731.
- (12) Browning found the original case proceedings that he used as the basis for *The Ring and the Book* at a market in Florence.
- (13) Works that compare *The Cenci* and *The Ring* are Shigeko Kurobane, "'Scorpion ringed with fire' and 'a rose for the breast of god': *The Cenci* and *The Ring and the Book*," *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 24 (June 2001): 68-77; Mary E. Finn, "In the House (of Cards) that Rome Built : Shelley's *The Cenci* and Browning's *The Ring and the Book*," in *Influence and Resistance in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry*, ed. G. Kim Blank and Margot K. Louis (New York : St. Martin's Press, 1993); Cundiff, *Robert Browning : A Shelley Promethean*, pp. 145-97; and Richard C. Keenan, "Shelley's Influence on the Poetry of Robert Browning" (unpublished PhD thesis, Temple University, 1974), pp. 142-178.
- (14) Mrs. Sutherland Orr, *Life and Letters of Robert Browning*, 2 vols. (Boston : Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1891), 2: 409. Other critics who have argued for the presence of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in *The Ring and the Book* are: J. E. Shaw, "The 'Donna Angelicata' in *The Ring and the Book*," *PMLA*, XLI (1926): 55-81; William Clyde DeVane, "The Virgin and the Dragon," *Yale Review* (1947): 33-46.
- (15) Elizabeth Barrett is addressed as "half angel and half bird" at the begin-

- ning of the poem (1.1391). All citations of *The Ring* are from *The Ring and the Book*, ed. Richard D. Altick and Thomas J. Collins (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2001).
- (16) See James Chandler, *England in 1819* (Chicago: Chicago University Press 1998), pp. 498–507.
- (17) *The Poems of Shelley*, Vol. 2, ed. Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews, contributing editors, Jack Donovan, Ralph Pite and Michael Rossington (Harlow: Longman, 2000), p. 727.
- (18) John Marshall Gest, *The Old Yellow Book: Source of Browning's The Ring and the Book* (Boston: Chipman Law, 1925), p. 624. See also Michael Meredith, "Flight from Arezzo: Fact and Fictions in *The Ring and the Book*," *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 25 (2003): 101–16.
- (19) Paul A. Cundiff argues for Browning's divergence from the Old Yellow Book. See "Robert Browning: 'Our Human Speech,'" *Victorian Newsletter*, No. 15 (Spring 1959): 1–9. Browning claims that he had found Pompilia in the *Old Yellow Book* "just as she speaks and acts in my poem." See John W. Chadwick, *The Christian Register* (Jan. 19, 1888): 37.
- (20) Gest, *The Old Yellow Book*, p. 624.
- (21) *Ibid.*, p. 624.
- (22) See the "Preface" to *The Cenci* included in *The Poems of Shelley*, 2: 735.
- (23) *The Poems of Shelley*, 2: 730.
- (24) Gest, *The Old Yellow Book*, p. 624.
- (25) Swinburne makes an extensive comparison of Count Cenci and Guido in his article on the "notes on the text of Shelley" in *The Fortnightly Review* (May 1, 1869): 539–61. The comparison also occurs in the *Saturday Review* 27 (April 3, 1869): 460–61.
- (26) Meredith, "Flight from Arezzo," p. 10. Meredith's reading derives from material that Browning either had no access to or repudiated as pro-Guido slander.
- (27) For details see below.
- (28) See Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 231–49.
- (29) *Ibid.*, p. 148.
- (30) *Ibid.*, p. 238

- (31) Unless otherwise stated, all citations of Shelley's poetry are from *The Poems of Shelley*, cited in note 17 above.
- (32) See "Pride: The Case of the Insulted Gentleman" in Jonsen and Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry*, pp. 216–27.
- (33) Chandler, *England in 1819*, p. 198.
- (34) Ibid., p. 504.
- (35) Orsino talks about the "self-anatomy" that is detectable in the Cenci family (2.2.110).
- (36) Shelley refers to *The Cenci* as "a sad reality" in his dedication to Leigh Hunt (*Poems*, p. 726). Browning mentions both *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound* in a letter dated 2 October 1845 to Elizabeth Barrett after talking about Shelley's early work *Zastrozzi*: "And now, please read a chorus in the "Prometheus Unbound" or a scene from the "Cenci" —and join company with Shelley again." See *The Brownings' Correspondence*, Vol. 11, ed. Philip Kelley and Scott Lewis (Winfield, KS: Wedgestone Press, 1993) p. 108.
- (37) *The Poems of Shelley*, 2: 732.
- (38) Browning was later to add this anecdote that concerned the reason for the failure of Beatrice's defense in the Cenci case in his *Cenciaja*.
- (39) *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, selected and edited by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2002), p. 327.
- (40) *The Poems of Shelley*, 2: 160.
- (41) See Shelley's "A Philosophical View of Reform," in *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, 10 vols. (New York: Gordian Press, 1965), Vol. 7. In the first section of the essay, he outlines the changes that have taken place on a more international level (including the Americas and India); in the second part, he argues for the "sentiment of the necessity of change": "Two circumstances arrest the attention of those who turn their regard to the present political condition of the English nation—first, that there is an almost universal sentiment of the approach of some change to be wrought in the institutions of the government, and secondly, the necessity and desirableness of such a change" (21).
- (42) Michael Rossington, discussing the title-page of *The Cenci* in his "Introduction" to the text writes: "It is worth noting that his [Shelley's] earlier

- idea, expressed to Peacock, that anonymity would be 'essential, deeply essential to [the play's] success' [...] had been abandoned, and that the word 'ITALY' allows itself to be read not simply as a statement of the provenance of the printed text but as a pointed reference to Cenci's relevance to the contemporary nationalist struggle in the Italian peninsula" (717).
- (43) *The Cenci* story "surfaced in the early nineteenth-century as a result of the legacy of the Napoleonic occupation of Italy during which, according to many observers, the authority of the Church had been challenged, especially in Rome" (*The Poems of Shelley*, 2: 870).
- (44) In fact, the story had political implications: the publication of "the first full-length unexpurgated version" of the Cenci story was ascribed "to the climate of political instability in the Italian peninsula in 1821" (872); "the tragedy means the beginning of Italian liberty" as described by a recent critic, quoted in *The Poems of Shelley*, 2: 870.
- (45) See his *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society* (1871).
- (46) See Flavia Alaya, "The Ring, the Rescue, & the Risorgimento: Reunifying the Brownings' Italy," *Browning Institute Studies* 6 (1978): 1-41; also included in *Critical Essays on Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Sandra Donaldson (New York: G. K. Hall, 1999), pp. 42-70.
- (47) It should be noted that as a Protestant, citing the Pope as a religious authority would have posed some problem for Browning.
- (48) *The Poems of Shelley*, 2: 723.
- (49) Sordello is compelled to choose between the Ghibelline faction (which will give him full reign of power) and the Guelph party (which he believes to be more progressive).
- (50) See John Woolford and Daniel Karlin, *Robert Browning* (London: Longman, 1996), pp. 157-65.
- (51) Paul Cundiff in his *Robert Browning*, p. 145, argues that: "*The Ring and the Book* is Browning's magnum opus in advancement of Prometheanism."
- (52) See "Browning: Good Moments and Ruined Quests," in *Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Harold Bloom and Adrienne Munich (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1979), pp. 123-47.
- (53) Daniel Karlin, for example, quotes from Browning's *Essay on Shelley* what is a description of Shelley that applies also to Elizabeth Barrett: "[h]er [Elizabeth Barrett's] poetry was perfectly blank to him, and this blank-

ness was [...] 'the very radiance and aroma of [her] personality, projected from it but not separated.'" Karlin also comments on the affinity between Elizabeth Barrett and Shelley: "[i]t is Elizabeth Barrett, not Browning, who is akin to Shelley, who is the divine messenger." See *The Courtship of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), pp. 182, 188.

- (54) Alaya, "*The Ring*, the Rescue, & the Risorgimento," p. 24, also presents a symbolic reading of the *The Ring*:

a Roman girl of ambiguous lineage (the old Italy, "Juliet among nations") is forced into a repressive marriage with a foreign nobleman ambitious of shooting up his shaky dynasty (the Austrian Tyrant); but prompted finally by the stirring of new life within her (Young Italy), she seeks liberation through both her own (revolutionary) defiance of the accepted order and the sympathetic intervention of others (the foreign libertarian powers).